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THE REAL X-FILES

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In the cult series The X Files, agents Mulder and Scully investigate paranormal cases the FBI prefer to keep locked away. Our two heroes deal with anything from aliens to mutants in their search for the answers. But is it just fiction? Jean Ritchie opens the real-life X-Files.

As the X Files begins it's second series on BBC2, with repeats on Sky, we look into the real-life unexplained cases the authorities wanted to keep hidden. We start this week with the UFO sighting that convinced the man from the Ministry they really exist.

While the Government has officially stayed silent about what happened in Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk, one cold night in December 1980, Nick Pope the Civil Servant heading the section dealing with the affair, has spoken out. When he took over the Ministry of Defence's UFO section in 1992, he was a sceptic. Now, after investigating 200 to 300 reports a year of strange objects coming from the sky, Nick Pope is convinced that UFOs exist - and that 15 years ago, we had one of our closest encounters with extraterrestrials.

"Something came down in that forest," he says. "It is now the best attested case of a UFO crash outside the United States. There are so many good witnesses and most of them were serving American air force men - trained to observe and recognise planes and other obvious things that are sometimes mistaken for UFOs."

The Rendlesham Forest UFO incident has so many independent witnesses, plus a tape recording made by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Halt, the deputy commander of the base, as he and his men approached the strange object, that there can be little doubt that something mysterious happened.

Rendlesham Forest is near the U.S air bases at Woodbridge and Bentwaters. On December 27th, 1980, two men on sentry duty in the early hours of the morning saw a dazzling pulsating white light in the forest, with coloured lights beneath it.

Those sent to investigate it were bewildered. "I knew that it was not an aircraft," said Sergeant Jim Penniston. "There was a very bright pulsating light illuminating the bottom of the craft and an extremely bright light on the top with other multi-coloured lights."

The men described the object as the size of a tank, triangular-shaped and made out of what looked like black glass. It had three legs.

After several minutes, it rose slowly upwards, above the trees and away from the men. It hovered briefly about 200ft in the air, then shot off at incredible speed.

Next day, Lt Col Halt, recorded the incident in the base logbook. To his surprise that evening, he was summoned from dinner by a report that the UFO was back. He took four men, including a photographer, and carried a Geiger counter and a tape recorder.

They found the original landing site where they recorded massive amounts of radiation. Then a strange red light appeared through the trees, pulsating "as though it were an eye winking at you", according to Halt. He and his men headed towards it, but the object moved away across a field and then silently split into four or five pieces.

Lt Col Halt filed a report which was sent to his own superiors and to Whitehall. UFO experts heard soon afterwards about the strange events, and investigations have been going on ever since. But it wasn't until three years later, when UFO investigator Jenny Randles got a copy of Halt's memo to Whitehall from America, that the British Government confirmed that lights had been reported from Rendlesham Forest.

But, according to Michael Heseltine, who's now Deputy Prime Minister but was then Secretary of State for Defence, the events in the forest "were of no defence significance".

Baron Hill-Norton, a former First Sea Lord and Chief of the Defence Staff, does not agree. "Either the Americans, including the deputy base commander, were hallucinating or they believed that something had landed and that they had taken photographs and records of it. In either event, it must be of interest to the defence of the United Kingdom," he said.

And Nick Pope, who has now been transferred to another MoD section, says: "There is so much detail in this case that I'm convinced what the airmen encountered in the forest

was extraterrestrial. I

joined the UFO section with a completely open mind - if anything, I was inclined to disbelieve.

And I found that in 95 per cent of the cases, there was a logical explanation - a plane, a meteorite.

But there was a core of cases that could not be explained away. The more I saw, the more I

knew that there is something going on that ought to be investigated fully."

Nick Pope has written a book, drawing on the information he came across as head of the UFO

desk, officially known as the Secretariat (Air Staff) 2a office. He is negotiating with the Ministry

of Defence for permission to publish it.